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UTILITY PATENT APPLICATION

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TO ALL WHOM IT MAY CONCERN:

15 Be it known that we:

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have invented new and useful improvements in an

30 **ELECTRONIC TRANSACTION RECEIPT SYSTEM AND METHOD**

for which the following is a specification:

ELECTRONIC TRANSACTION RECEIPT SYSTEM AND METHOD

CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATION

5 The benefit of the filing date of U.S. Provisional Patent Application Serial No. 60/180,102, filed February 3, 2000, entitled "Network-Based Purchase Receipt Confirmation and Organization Application with Functional Facilitating Ancillary Merchant and Service Links," is hereby claimed, and the specification thereof is incorporated herein in its entirety by this reference.

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BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

1. Field of the Invention

 The present invention relates generally to electronically performed steps of sales and other transactions in which a receipt is issued and, more specifically, to the issuance of electronic transaction receipts having links to related information useful to the holder of the receipt.

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2. Description of the Related Art

 Receipts are issued to participants in transactions to provide evidence that the transaction has been completed. Merchants, banks and others have long issued paper receipts to customers. The advent of electronic transactions has led to the issuance of receipts in electronic or computer-readable format. For example, in electronic commerce ("e-commerce") transactions conducted via the global super-network referred to as the Internet, receipts are typically issued in the form of an electronic mail ("e-mail") message to the buyer.

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 In a typical consumer e-commerce transaction, the buyer uses a personal computer or similar (client) device to communicate with a remote (server) computer operated by or on behalf of a merchant or seller. The hypermedia user interface

environment of that portion of the Internet known as the World Wide Web or simply "Web" facilitates consumer e-commerce shopping because it allows sellers to display images of the products, attractive advertisements, and other graphics on Web pages. Web pages that allow a user to send information to the server are generally referred to as forms. In accordance with Web conventions, forms associated with products for sale typically include, in addition to some combination of text and graphics intended to induce a user into purchasing an item, hyperlinks and interactive graphical structures such as buttons and checkboxes. A buyer can indicate the items he is interested in purchasing by selecting or activating corresponding hyperlinks or graphical structures using a mouse or similar input device on his computer. (Activating a hyperlink or graphical structure in this manner is commonly referred to as "clicking on" it.) In response, the server presents the buyer with a form requesting payment information, such as credit card information. In response to submitting that form, the server may present the buyer with a form confirming the transaction. In addition, the server may cause an e-mail message to be transmitted to an e-mail account designated by the buyer. The e-mail message can serve as a receipt if it includes information identifying the items purchased and the price paid. It may also include information describing shipping terms, such as when the seller expects to ship the items to the buyer.

Although e-mail message receipts are primarily plain text that sets forth the essential information identifying and confirming the sales transaction, they may also include graphics and hyperlinks. For example, e-commerce retailers have been known to include product advertisements in e-mail receipts. Such a product advertisement can include a hyperlink associated with an image depicting the product. In response to clicking on the image, the user is presented with an opportunity to purchase the product.

Another type of hyperlink that e-commerce retailers have been known to include in e-mail receipts relates to shipping. In response to clicking on such a hyperlink, the user is presented with an opportunity to track the status of his order. The tracking function may be done in association with the retailer's Web site or, alternatively, an

independent shipper's Web site such as UPS or FEDEX.

It would be desirable to provide electronic transaction receipts that more fully exploit the opportunity for inducing additional sales. It would further be desirable to provide electronic transaction receipts that have hyperlinks directed to novel
5 functionality. It would still further be desirable to provide a system that stores electronic transaction receipts and gathers information from stored receipts. The present invention addresses these problems and deficiencies and others in the manner described below.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

10 The invention relates to collecting electronic receipts in a database. A buyer can log into the database system and retrieve receipts for the transactions in which he participated. The receipts may have hyperlinks that provide additional functionality.

It is to be understood that both the foregoing general description and the following detailed description are exemplary and explanatory only and are not restrictive
15 of the invention, as claimed.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

The accompanying drawings illustrate one or more embodiments of the invention and, together with the written description, serve to explain the principles of the invention.
20 Wherever possible, the same reference numbers are used throughout the drawings to refer to the same or like elements of an embodiment, and wherein:

Figure 1 illustrates the issuance of an electronic receipt having a hyperlink as a step of a transaction;

Figure 2 illustrates an embodiment of the invention in which, in connection
25 with a sales transaction, an originator issues a receipt having links to one or more of the seller, the originator and a third party;

Figure 3 illustrates a system in which buyers and sellers, third parties and non-seller originators of receipts communicate information via a hypermedia network;

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Figure 4 illustrates a computer system operable by a buyer of goods or services in which electronic receipts are received;

Figure 5 illustrates a computer system operable by a seller of goods or services in which electronic receipts are issued;

5 Figure 6 illustrates a computer system operable by an originator entity that issues receipts but is not also a seller of the goods or services;

Figure 7A is a flow diagram illustrating a method of operation of the system;

Figure 7B is a continuation sheet of Fig. 7A;

10 Figure 8 is a flow diagram illustrating a method for organizing and otherwise handling electronic receipts;

Figure 9 illustrates a screen display representing a receipt;

Figure 10 illustrates a screen display representing further information regarding a purchased item listed on a receipt;

Figure 11 illustrates a screen display representing a buyer's collected receipts;

15 Figure 12 illustrates a screen display representing further information regarding one of the buyer's receipts;

Figure 13 illustrates a screen display representing the use of receipt categories; and

20 Figure 14 illustrates a screen display representing a buyer's receipts for a selected category.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

As illustrated in Fig. 1, in a transaction of any suitable type an originator 10 issues an electronic receipt 12 to a user. The transaction can be any type of transaction in which it is known to issue receipts. Originator 10 can be, for example, among other types of entities, a seller of goods or services. Accordingly, user 14 can be, for example, a buyer of the goods or services. Receipt 12 has a link 16 that associates it with additional

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functionality. It is such an embodiment of the invention that is described in further detail below.

As illustrated in Figs. 2 and 3, the transaction can be a sales transaction conducted between a seller 18 and a remotely located buyer 20 via a hypermedia computer network 22 such as that which is presently known as the World Wide Web or simply "Web." The Web is part of the global super-network presently referred to as the Internet. Nevertheless, network 22 can be any sub-network of the Internet or any other suitable wide-area network through which potential buyers and potential sellers can conduct transactions. Although other network environments may be suitable, the hypermedia environment of the Web provides a number of advantages that will become apparent from the descriptions below. In accordance with the hypermedia environment of the illustrated embodiment of the invention, link 16 of Fig. 1 can be a hyperlink. As well-known in the art, the Web is a client-server environment in which computers denominated as clients can communicate with other computers denominated as servers. Servers transmit to client's documents known as Web pages. Hyperlinks may be embedded in a Web page document to link it to another document or to invoke an applet or other executable code that performs some functional processing, i.e., more than merely retrieving another predetermined Web page. The term "document" includes files and other items of any suitable medium, including graphical imagery, still and moving images, and sound.

As described below in further detail, in response to a sales transaction between seller 18 and buyer 20, an originator 24 issues or transmits a sales transaction receipt 26 to buyer 20 via network 22 on behalf of seller 18. Although in the illustrated embodiment of the invention, originator 24 and seller 18 are separate entities, in other embodiments they can be the same entity or otherwise integrated with one another. In other words, in such alternative embodiments the same entity that sells the goods or services also issues receipt 26. Also, note that although Fig. 2 illustrates only the relationships between a single seller 18, a single buyer 20 and a single originator 24 for purposes of clarity, there may be many more of such entities, i.e., plural entities, as

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indicated in Fig. 3 by the additional buyer 28 and additional seller 30 and the ellipses (“...”). Either of buyers 20 and 28 can conduct a sales transaction with either of sellers 18 and 30, and the exemplary descriptions below apply equally to all such transactions.

Although in the illustrated embodiment of the invention the sales transaction is
5 conducted electronically via a computer network such as the Web, in other embodiments the sales transaction itself can be conducted in any other suitable manner. For example, the transaction can be conducted in a retail store that the buyer physically enters, shops in, and makes a purchase at the seller’s point-of-sale (POS) terminal or register. In such an embodiment the seller’s POS terminal communicates with an originator or,
10 alternatively, with the seller’s own means for generating electronic receipts. In response to an indication of completion of the transaction, the originator or the seller generates and transmits the receipt to the buyer via the hypermedia network. As explained in further detail below, transmitting the receipt to the buyer refers to transmitting it to a computing device designated by the buyer or associated with the buyer.

15 There are embodiments of the invention in which a third party 32 can also be involved. As described below in further detail, third party 32 may, in some such embodiments, be an entity that sells goods or services that are commercially related to those that are the subject of the primary transaction between seller 18 and buyer 20. An example of a commercially related product is one that is used as an accessory to the product sold in the primary transaction. A straightforward example of an “accessory,”
20 as that term is used in the consumer products field, is a battery charger for a battery-operated radio. Likewise, a drill bit is commonly considered an accessory for a drill. Another example of a commercially related product is one that is used as in the same field as the product sold in the primary transaction. For example, it is well-recognized
25 that a drill and a saw are both used in the field of woodworking.

Alternatively or in addition, in some embodiments of the invention third party 32 can be an entity that accepts returns on behalf of seller 18. It is common for buyers to return products to electronic retailers, and companies exist that perform this service for

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retailers. Alternatively or in addition to the above, third party 32 can be an entity that provides product warranty service on behalf of seller 18.

As further described below, receipt 26 is an electronically created document instantiated by encoding the information included therein into a standardized format such as that known as Extensible Markup Language (XML). Tools for performing such coding are well-known in the art to which the invention relates and include commercially available software such as JDOM and XERCES, which are publicly distributed on the Internet in both binary and source form. As well understood by persons skilled in the art to which the invention relates such tools encode the information from a JAVA class, application, servlet or applet. Receipt 26 can be encrypted to provide security using any suitable means, such as the RSA toolkit produced by RSA Security of Bedford, Massachusetts and the VERISIGN toolkit produced by Verisign In. of Mountain View, California. Once created, receipt 26 can be wrapped in a SOAP envelope. As well-known in the art, SOAP, which refers to the Simple Object Access Protocol, is a standards-based way of adding an XML envelope to an XML documents so that the recipient(s) can know what the contents of the XML document are supposed to contain and what, if any, processing is expected or required to be performed. The encrypted, wrapped receipt 26 can then be transmitted by any suitable delivery mechanism. Examples of well-known mechanisms that persons of skill in the art will recognize as suitable for this purpose include electronic mail (e-mail), file transfer protocol (FTP), a messaging middleware such as JAVA Messaging Service (JMS), or a proprietary commercially available product such as MQSERIES from IBM Corporation.

As further described below, in the illustrated embodiment of the invention receipt 26 includes hyperlinks 34, 36 and 38. As well known in the art, a hyperlink is a reference or link from some point in one hypermedia document to another document or point in a document. Hyperlink 34 is a link to (something stored on the server operated by) seller 18; hyperlink 36 is a link to (something stored on the server operated by) originator 24; and hyperlink 38 is a link to (something stored on the server operated by) third party 32.

Although in the illustrated embodiment of the invention three hyperlinks 34, 36 and 38 are included in receipt 26 for purposes of illustration and clarity, any number of such links can be included, and they can link to any other suitable entity. Indeed, receipts having multiple links to multiple documents, applets or other suitable items stored on a server or on different servers are very much contemplated, as illustrated by the examples described below.

As illustrated in Fig. 4, the client computer operated by buyer 20 can be a conventional personal computer on which a Web browser 40 operates. As well known in the art, a browser is a software program that allows a user to receive and view hypertext documents from a server. Received documents are displayed on the video monitor 42 of the computer or other suitable display. Common commercially available browsers such as NETSCAPE NAVIGATOR and MICROSOFT EXPLORER typically display a hyperlink in some distinguishing way, e.g. in a different color, font or style. Browsers associate hyperlinks with Internet target documents and, when the user activates a hyperlink, the computer transmits a request for that document. As is conventional, the computer includes a mouse 44 with which the user can activate displayed hyperlinks. The computer also include other hardware and software elements conventionally included in personal computers, such as a keyboard 46, a processor 48, disk storage device 50 such as a hard disk drive, input/output interfaces 52, a network interface 54, and a removable read/write storage device 56 such as a drive that uses a CD-ROM 58 or floppy disk. The software elements of the programmed computer, such as browser 40, are illustrated for purposes of clarity as executable in a main memory 60, but as persons skilled in the art will understand they may not in actuality reside simultaneously or in their entireties in memory 60. The computer has other hardware and software elements of the types conventionally included in personal computers, such as an operating system, but are not shown for purposes of clarity. Note that software elements can be loaded into the computer via read/write storage device 56 or network 22.

The computer also has a receipt organizer or handler 62. Receipt handler 62 allows buyer 20 to collect, store, categorize, sort and view receipts such as receipt 26. The receipts are received via network 22 and can be stored by receipt handler 62 in a user receipt database 64 on disk storage device 50. Receipt handler 62 can convert receipt data to the formats understood by common commercially available financial software programs (not shown), such as the personal finance program QUICKEN, and download the data to those programs for further processing.

Although in the illustrated embodiment of the invention the computing device on which the buyer receives receipts is described as a conventional personal computer such as a desktop or laptop computer, in other embodiments of the invention the device can be any suitable type of device that has a hypermedia user interface, i.e., that allows a user to interact with documents through the use of hyperlinks. Also note that the network can be wired, wireless or any suitable combination or hybrid of such media. Examples of suitable computing devices include those commonly referred to as personal digital assistants (PDAs), palmtop computers, and digital cellular telephones and other hybrid voice/data communication devices.

As illustrated in Fig. 5, the system operated by seller 18 includes a server computer system of the type conventionally used by e-merchants to effect electronic commerce transactions. For purposes of clarity, the system is illustrated as a single or stand-alone server computer, but as persons skilled in the art will recognize, the system can include multiple layers of servers (e.g., front-end and back-end) and storage devices as is common in the art for such e-commerce server systems. Similarly, although not illustrated for purposes of clarity, the system can include a video monitor, keyboard, mouse and other user input/output devices of the types commonly included in such e-commerce server systems for use by system administrators and similar personnel. As a computer, it includes elements along the lines of a memory 65, network interface 66, processor 68, disk storage device 70, and a removable-medium read/write storage device 72.

The software elements of the programmed computer include an e-commerce engine 74, a receipt generator 76, and a receipt organizer or handler 78. Receipt handler 78 can use application program interfaces (APIs) 80 to interface with configuration reference tables 82, described in further detail below, which can be stored locally on disk storage device 70 as in the illustrated embodiment of the invention or, in other embodiments, can be stored remotely, e.g., on a server operated by another entity. APIs 80 also interface receipt handler 78 with applications that are part of e-commerce engine 74. In other words, e-commerce engine 74, which has overall control of the sales transaction with buyer 20, including controlling the exchange of appropriate Web forms with buyer 20, can invoke APIs 80 at the point in the transaction at which receipt 26 (Fig. 2) is to be generated. This, in turn, causes receipt generator 76 to generate receipt 26 using tables 82 as described in further detail below. In the illustrated embodiment of the invention, generated receipts are not only transmitted to the buyers that participated in the transaction but copies are also stored in a receipt database 84. Note that software elements can be loaded into this server computer via a CD-ROM 86 or similar medium readable by read/write storage device 72 or can be loaded via network 22 from a remote source. Receipt handler 78 is similar to receipt handler 62 of Fig. 4 but can be used remotely via network 22 by more persons than buyer 20; anyone who completed a sales transaction with seller 18 can remotely access receipts pertaining to the transaction. Furthermore, others who did not participate in any transactions, such as market research firms and manufacturers of products offered by seller 18, may be permitted access to aggregate information generated by receipt handler 78 using data gleaned from the stored receipts, such as statistics and raw numbers without any information identifying the buyers. Because buyer privacy may be important, such other parties may not be permitted access to the receipts themselves.

Although in the illustrated embodiment of the invention the seller's computing system or server is accessible to remotely located users (i.e., buyers or third parties), in other embodiments it can be accessible to on-site users for some or all of the uses

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described above. For example, the system can be located in a seller's retail store for use by customers in returning products or otherwise accessing their stored receipts. Such an in-store system can be housed in a kiosk and can include a convenient user interface, such as a menu-driven touch-screen. Such a system can also issue coupons to customers, either by printing them or transmitting directly to the store's POS system, conduct customer satisfaction surveys, and perform other ancillary functions. A coupon offer directed to the buyer and associated coupon codes can be included in the receipts along with an associated hyperlink or any other suitable mechanism for producing or otherwise redeeming the coupon.

As illustrated in Fig. 6, the system operated by originator 24 is similar to that operated by seller 18 but does not engage in sales transactions. It includes only a receipt generator 88 similar to receipt generator 76 (Fig. 5), associated APIs 90 similar to APIs 80 (Fig. 5), and a receipt organizer or handler 92 similar to receipt handler 78 (Fig. 5). It likewise includes a receipt database 89 and configuration reference tables 91 similar to those described above with regard to seller 18. As in the merchant or e-commerce server system described above, for purposes of clarity, the system is illustrated as a single or stand-alone server computer, but persons skilled in the art will recognize that the system can have a more complex architecture and include other elements commonly included in commercial servers. As in the above-described system, it includes similar conventional computer elements along the lines of a memory 94, network interface 96, processor 98, disk storage device 100, and a removable-medium read/write storage device 102 for reading from and writing to a disk 104.

The major difference between this system of originator 24 and the system of seller 18 is that this system only generates and handles receipts and does not participate in the sales transactions themselves. Receipt generator 88 operates in response to instructions (received via network 22) from sellers to generate receipts. From the perspective of the buyers such as buyer 20, the role of seller 18 in issuing receipts is transparent. That is, buyer 20, in conducting a sales transaction with seller 18, is not

normally informed of the source of receipts; buyer 20 may assume that the receipts he receives originate with seller 18 when in fact, in this instance, they originate with originator 24.

Receipt handler 88 is similar to receipt handler 78 of Fig. 5 but can be used
5 remotely via network 22 by more buyers than those who participated in a sales transaction with seller 18; any buyer who completed a sales transaction with any seller (e.g., either seller 18 or seller 30 in the illustrated embodiment) can remotely access receipts pertaining to the transaction. Their access to such receipt-handling services may be conditioned upon complying with restrictions imposed by originator 24, such as by
10 providing personal information and selecting a username and password. As in the system described above, others who did not participate in any transactions but who may wish to obtain aggregate receipt information for market research or other purposes may be granted access upon compliance with any conditions imposed by originator 24.

Note that in the illustrated embodiment of the invention not only originator 24 but
15 also seller 18 is capable of generating and handling receipts. Nevertheless, in a similar embodiment, a given seller that is otherwise the same as seller 18 may not have such capability and may obtain receipt generation services (as well as receipt-handling services) from another entity, such as originator 24. In such embodiments, the seller can be essentially the same as seller 18 but has a system with APIs that cause a receipt
20 generation instruction to be transmitted to originator 24. In response to such an instruction, originator 24 generates receipt 26 and transmits it to buyer 20 on behalf of that seller. It is contemplated that the seller pay a fee for receipt generation services.

The methods described above perhaps can be more readily understood with reference to the flow diagram of Fig. 7A. At step 106 seller 18 and buyer 20 conduct a
25 sales transaction. In the illustrated embodiment of the invention, buyer 20 shops a Web site operated by seller 18. In other words, the Web site presents pages (not shown) to buyer 20 in the conventional manner that illustrate or describe the products or services available for sale or otherwise induce buyer 20 to make a purchase. Browser 40 (Fig. 4)

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transmits requests for Web pages to seller 18, which in response transmits the requested pages to buyer 20, where they are presented to buyer 20 in the conventional manner on display 42. As an example, the Web site may be operated by a seller of consumer products such as consumer electronics, kitchen items and other household items. In the conventional manner, buyer 20 selects an item such as a stereo as a purchase. Buyer 20 may select other items before indicating he is finished shopping. A metaphor to shopping in a physical retail store that is sometimes used on e-commerce Web sites for this step of the transaction is "proceeding to checkout." In the checkout step of the transaction, buyer 20 submits payment information, such as a credit card number, and shipping address information. The transaction concludes in a conventional manner with buyer 20 receiving a Web page setting forth the purchases, the payment information and other information and asking buyer 20 to confirm by, for example, clicking on a "confirm" button. In response, receipt 26 is generated at step 108 and transmitted to buyer 20 at step 110. As noted above, in the illustrated embodiment of the invention (see Fig. 2) these steps are performed by seller 18 transmitting an instruction to originator 24 to issue receipt 26, and originator 24 generating and transmitting receipt 26. In other embodiments, seller 18 itself can perform steps 108 and 110 without assistance from originator 24. In addition to transmitting receipt 26, originator 24 maintains a copy in database 89 (Fig. 6).

At step 112 buyer 20 receives and opens receipt 26. Like other Web documents received under control of browser 40, the opened receipt 26 is presented to buyer 20 on display 42 in hypertext format. (See Fig. 4.) Accordingly, buyer 20 can click on and otherwise interact with hyperlinks and other elements of receipt 26 using mouse 44 and keyboard 46.

Receipt 26 can have, for example, an appearance along the lines of that shown in Fig. 9 when opened and displayed in a browser window 114. This representation of receipt 26 includes, among other elements, representations of: the name or logo 116 and address 118 of seller 18, the name of buyer 120, the date of the sale, a list 124 of the

purchases, a corresponding list of their sales prices 126, and the subtotals and total price paid 128. Note that these elements represent information that is essentially the information included in any conventional sales receipt. In addition to these elements are representations of the name or logo 130 of third party 32 and some products 132 offered for sale by third party 32. Also represented are a "check warranty" button 134, a "register product(s)" button 136, a "check rebates" button 138 and a "customer survey" button 140.

Products 132 are selected for inclusion by originator 24 when receipt 26 is generated. In the illustrated example, the products 132, a television and a stereo component, are commercially related to one of the items in list 124, the "Wavphonica Stereo - [item number] 342567," by virtue of all being used in the field of consumer entertainment electronics. Products 132 are selected in response to configuration reference tables 91 (Fig. 6), which in essence relates each product offered for sale by each seller to products that that seller deems to be commercially related to that product. In addition to products that are used in the same field, other suitable commercially related products 132 are accessory items for the stereo system, such as cables. Receipt generator 88 inputs to tables 91 the product that is the subject of the sales transaction or primary purchase. In response, tables 91 output one or more products 132 that are commercially related to the primary purchase. Receipt generator 88 then inserts representations of these products 132 into receipt 26. Buyer 20, in viewing the generated receipt 26, is thus induced by the representations of the selected products 132 to purchase one or more of them as secondary purchases.

To initiate the process of purchasing one of products 132, buyer 20 clicks on its representation, as indicated by step 133 in Fig. 7B. The representation is associated with an active hyperlink in receipt 26. Accordingly, in response to clicking on it, browser 40 (Fig. 4) transmits a request for a Web page that offers the product for sale. The Web page (not shown) can be located at a site operated by seller 18 or, alternatively, the manufacturer of the product or other third party such as a third party merchant. Although

not illustrated for purposes of clarity, as indicated by step 135 and 137 in Fig. 7B, buyer 20 interacts with the site through a sequence of Web pages in the same manner as any conventional e-commerce sales transaction process, such as that described above. In other words, buyer 20 views information about the product available for secondary purchase, selects the product, provides payment information, and so forth. In instances in which the secondary sale is made by a third party merchant, i.e., not seller 18, it is contemplated that the third party merchant compensate seller 18 for what is in effect a referral of buyer 20. This compensation or commission can take the form of a fixed fee per referral, as a percentage of the price of the secondary purchase, or any other suitable form.

Buttons 134, 136, 138 and 140 provide further functionality. In response to clicking on any of buttons 134-140, buyer 20 is presented with a drop-down selection list with information similar to that of list 124 identifying the products purchased.

For example, as indicated by step 142 in Fig. 7B, in response to buyer 20 clicking on button 134 and selecting a product, an associated hyperlink in receipt 26 causes browser 40 to transmit a request for a Web page (not shown) that depicts the text of a warranty for the selected product. For example, buyer 20 could choose to view the manufacturer's warranty for the "Wavphonica stereo." As indicated by step 144 in Fig. 7B, buyer 20 views the warranty. The Web page can be located at a site operated by, for example, the manufacturer. With regard to Fig. 2, in such an example third party 32 is the manufacturer. As indicated by further step 146, if buyer 20 believes he is entitled to some action under the warranty, such as having the manufacturer service or replace the product, buyer 20 can interact with the warranty page to request initiation of such a warranty service procedure. The procedure may include returning the product to the manufacturer or an authorized service center. In such an instance, the procedure includes transmitting a label (not shown) to buyer 20 that he can print on a suitable printer attached to the computer and affix to the packaging in which the product is returned. The label includes all information necessary for the shipper to route the package and may

contain additional information, such as a return authorization number, that is useful to the manufacturer.

In response to clicking on button 136 and selecting a product, an associated hyperlink causes browser 40 to transmit a request for a Web page (not shown) that is a form that buyer 20 can fill out with his name, address and other information and transmit back to the manufacturer to register the product. Product registration is a common mechanism used by manufacturers to obtain marketing information from purchasers of their products and also to keep the purchasers apprised of recalls or any other information in which the manufacturers believe the purchasers may be interested. If the manufacturer has provided a recall notice, buyer 20 can interact with the manufacturer's Web site to initiate return or service of the product under the manufacturer's recall procedure. (See Fig. 7B, steps 150 and 152.)

As indicated by steps 154, 156 and 158, in a similar manner button 138 provides a mechanism for buyer 20 to determine whether the manufacturer is offering a rebate on the purchase price. The associated link can be to the manufacturer's Web site.

Button 140 provides a similar mechanism for buyer 20 to respond to a customer survey (not shown) provided by the manufacturer or the seller through an associated hyperlink to the corresponding Web site.

In response to selecting or clicking on a representation of a product listed in list 124, an associated hyperlink causes browser 40 to transmit a request to originator 24. In response, originator 24 provides an associated product-specific Web page that can have an appearance along the lines of that shown in Fig. 10. In the illustrated embodiment of the invention, this page provides information and options similar to those appearing on receipt 26 itself plus additional information and options. In other embodiments, all such information and options can be provided on the receipt or, alternatively, on an associated product-specific page such as this. Among the information provided on this page is: a representation of the name 160 of buyer 20, date of purchase 162 of the selected product, and product-identifying information 164.

In addition, the page includes a representation of an “accessories” hyperlink 165. In response to selecting or clicking on hyperlink 165, browser 40 is directed to a process provided by originator 24 that selects accessory products that are related to the selected product. Accessories are selected using configuration reference tables (Fig. 6) in the same manner described above with regard to selection of products 132. Buyer 20 is presented with an opportunity to purchase such accessories in the manner described above.

The page further includes a “return to digital receipt” button 166, a “users manual” button 168, a “shipping status” button 170, a “video instructions” button 172, a “categorize product” button 174, a “warranty” button 176, a “product returns” button 178, a “write review” button 180, and a “recalls” button 182. Some of these buttons initiate functions duplicative of those described above, such as “warranty” button 176 and “recalls” button 182. The returns procedure under button 178 includes, as described above, transmitting a label (not shown) to buyer 20 that buyer 20 can print and affix to the packaging in which the product is returned. Button 166, as the name implies, returns browser 40 to receipt 26 as represented in, for example, Fig. 9.

In response to clicking on button 168, an associated hyperlink causes browser 40 to transmit a request for a page (not shown) that depicts the text of a user’s manual for the selected product. The hyperlink may be directed to the manufacturer’s web site or another entity’s web site. It is sometimes the case that an entity separate from the manufacturer of a product publishes manuals for the product. In either case, a third party 32 (i.e., neither seller 18 nor originator 24) supplies the manual to buyer 20. Note that a representation of a “product specifications” hyperlink 169 can provide a similar function. In response to clicking on hyperlink 169, specifications for the selected product are retrieved from a suitable, e.g., the manufacturer’s, Web site.

In response to clicking on button 170, an associated hyperlink causes browser 40 to transmit a request for a page (not shown) that indicates the shipping status of the purchase made by buyer 20. Seller 18 includes suitable methods in its e-commerce

engine 74 to respond to such a request by determining the shipping status and transmitting it to buyer 20. Automated checking of shipping status of an order is in and of itself well known in the art and thus readily capable of implementation by one of ordinary skill.

5 Button 172 provides functionality similar to that of button 168, but rather than a textual or graphical instruction manual, the information is provided in video or movie format.

10 In response to clicking on button 174, an associated hyperlink causes browser 40 to transmit a request for a page (not shown) that allows buyer 20 to associate a category with the purchased item. The hyperlink may be directed to the web site of either originator 24 or seller 18, depending on which entity's receipt organizer service buyer 20 is using. The receipt organizer is described in further detail below. The category aids buyer 20 in searching and organizing receipts. For example, buyer 20 can associate the selected item with a "gift" category. Then, using the organizer service, buyer 20 can
15 search for all receipts of the category "gift."

 "Product returns" button functions similarly to "warranty" button 134 but does not include a step whereby buyer 20 can view a warranty. (See Fig. 7B, steps 184 and 186.) Rather, buyer 20 uses button 134 to initiate a procedure to return the selected product for reasons other than warranty service. For example, seller 18 may have a
20 policy that allows buyers to return merchandise with which buyers are unsatisfied. Alternatively to seller 18, the return procedure can be provided by third party 32.

 In response to clicking on button 180, an associated hyperlink causes browser 40 to transmit a request for a page (not shown) that allows buyer 20 to enter a review of the product, i.e., the buyer's opinion of the merits of the product. The form can be returned
25 to originator 24 and posted on the Web site. Alternatively, the review can be transmitted to a Web site of seller 18 or third party 32. Other potential buyers can read the reviews of a product before deciding whether to purchase it.

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As illustrated in Fig. 8, buyer 20 can participate in a receipt organizer service operated by an entity such as originator 24. The service is accessed via the Web using the computer and its browser 40 in the conventional manner described above. Receipt handler 92 (Fig. 6) of originator 24 controls the receipt organizer functions described below. At step 188 buyer 20 accesses a Web site of originator 24 and interacts with a home page (not shown) that includes, among other options, registering for the organizer service. In essentially the same manner in which one registers for conventional Web-based services, buyer 20 completes a form in which he provides personal information such as his name and address and selects a user name and password. In response to submitting this form, originator 24 sets up an account for buyer 20. Thereafter, upon accessing the Web site home page, buyer 20 can select the option of logging in to the receipt organizer service by providing his user name and password, as indicated by step 190. After logging in, buyer 20 is presented with a page that provides several options, such as "receipts" and "reports." At step 192 buyer 20 can, for example, select the "receipts" option. In response, originator 24 searches for and retrieves receipts for purchases made by buyer 20 and provides them in a suitable format, such as a chronological listing.

Figure 11 illustrates an exemplary browser window 194 in which such a chronological receipt listing is displayed in response to selecting the "receipts" option. Each line in the listing represents a transaction for which a receipt was issued. A column labeled "merchant" identifies the seller by name. A column labeled "purchase date" identifies the date of the transaction. A column labeled "shipping info" provides information indicating the status of the shipment for that transaction. A column labeled "total price" indicates the price paid for the goods or services. A column labeled "receipt type" indicates manually input receipts or automatically generated receipts. Buyer 20 can select any transaction by clicking on one of the lines.

In response to selecting one of the lines, an associated hyperlink causes browser 40 to request a page providing further information with regard to the corresponding

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product or service purchased. Such a page can have an appearance along the lines of that illustrated in Fig. 12. Among other information, this page includes identifying information 196 such as manufacturer and model number, Universal Product Code (UPC), SKU and serial number. It further includes a group 198 of buttons that allow
5 buyer 20 to categorize the purchase as described above. Using these buttons, at step 200 buyer 20 can select not only a category (e.g. "Appliance") but also a sub-category (e.g., "Kitchen"). Buyer 20 can further select an event to associate with the purchase (e.g., "Personal") and a sub-event (e.g., "Gift"). In addition, buyer 20 can select a recipient and sub-recipient to associate with the purchase. Another group 202 of buttons are included
10 for the similar purpose of adding an indication whether the purchase is tax-deductible or otherwise tax-related and whether the purchase is to be considered part of the inventory of items owned by buyer 20 (for example, for purposes of substantiating claims under a homeowner's personal property insurance policy). The categorization and other information added by buyer 20 is added or attached to the record of the transaction in
15 database 89. The page also can include buttons 204 that initiate the functions described above for obtaining warranty service, user manuals, returns, and the like. The page can further include an inducement 206 to purchase accessories for the product. The accessories are determined using product reference tables 91 in the same manner described above.

20 Another option that buyer 20 can select from the options presented on the receipt organizer service home page is "reports." In response to selecting "reports" originator 24 transmits to buyer 20 a page such as that illustrated in Fig. 13. Button 208 allows buyer 20 to query how much he spent at a selectable group of sellers or individual seller. Button 210 allows buyer 20 to query how much he spent during a selectable time period,
25 such as the current month, current week or current year. Button 212 allows buyer 20 to query how much he spent in a selectable product category (e.g., "electronics"). Button 214 allows buyer 20 to query what was his biggest expense. Button 216 allows buyer 20 to query what he purchased for a selectable recipient. Button 218 allows buyer 20 to

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query what are his tax-related expenses. Similarly, two input boxes 220 and 222 allow buyer 20 to enter starting and ending dates to query how much he spent during the time interval between them. In response to clicking one of buttons 208-218 and making a selection, browser 40 transmits a request to originator 24 that indicates the query. In response, originator 24 queries database 89 and tallies the information requested by buyer 20.

Originator 24 transmits the information back to buyer 20, where it is presented in a suitable Web page. For example, if buyer 20 clicks on button 216 and selects from the displayed options a recipient named "Susan," buyer 20 receives in response a Web page such as that illustrated in Fig. 14. Records of all purchased items to which buyer 20 attached a recipient categorization of "Susan" are displayed. For each listed item, the purchase date, quantity, receipt number, description, price, seller or vendor, category, event, recipient (in this example, "Susan"), tax-related status, and home (or business) inventory status are displayed. Note that these are some of the categorizations that buyer 20 added in accordance with the procedure described above with regard to Fig. 12.

Note that the page listing the items purchased for the selected recipient (in this example, "Susan") has an "Export to EXCEL" button 224. In response to clicking button 224, browser 40 transmits a request to download or export the displayed data to the well-known spreadsheet program MICROSOFT EXCEL. As persons skilled in the art will recognize, a similar button can be included to export the data to any suitable application software, such as a personal finance program. An example of such a program is QUICKEN from Intuit, Inc. In Fig. 8, step 226 indicates this procedure.

To facilitate receipt data transfer, such as exporting the receipt data to finance and spreadsheet programs and the like, the receipt data is stored in database 89 in a standard or uniform format. This feature is primarily important in embodiments of the invention in which sellers generate and transmit the receipts rather than having a separate originator entity (e.g., originator 24) perform those functions. In such embodiments, there is a party similar to originator 24 in that it includes receipt-handling and receipt-storing functions

but different from originator 24 in that it does not itself generate receipts. Rather, such a party receives copies of receipts directly from sellers and stores them in the receipt database where they can be accessed by buyers, sellers and other entities in the manner described below. In such embodiments of the invention, when a receipt is received, it is converted from whatever format that seller may use into a standard or uniform format for storage in the receipt database. Because all receipts stored in the database have the same format, it is a straightforward matter to convert their data to a format compatible with the external program, e.g., QUICKEN. Such standardization also facilitates data-mining.

At any time after logging in, buyer 20 can log out, as indicated by step 228. It should be understood that not all method steps described above need be performed in any given session, i.e., the interval during which buyer 20 is logged in. For example, buyer 20 may log in and download receipt data to an application program without performing the categorizing step. Likewise, the steps can be performed in orders or sequences other than that described above, which is intended to be merely illustrative.

As illustrated by the above-described embodiments, the present invention provides electronic receipts having novel functionality, such as upselling or inducing secondary sales of related products and providing access to warranties, product returns, user manuals, recall notices and other information potentially of interest to consumers. It further provides a mechanism for organizing and otherwise handling such receipts.

It will be apparent to those skilled in the art that various modifications and variations can be made in the present invention without departing from the scope or spirit of the invention. Other embodiments of the invention will be apparent to those skilled in the art from consideration of the specification and practice of the invention disclosed herein. It is intended that the specification and examples be considered as exemplary only, with a true scope and spirit of the invention being indicated by the following claims.